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Mafia (orig under Breslin)

# The CIA and Castro, or the Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight

By Jimmy Breslin

Beautiful. Here they were, jammed into one room, a half-dozen Cubans smoking big cigars, some CIA agents — covert, clandestine and choking — and Johnny Rosselli, a Mafia patriot, and they were all discussing, on this day in Miami in April of 1961, about how they were really going to get this Fidel Castro.

Sitting in the room in Miami, Johnny Rosselli was thinking very hard about what he was going to say; in this, his first assignment as a special undercover secret agent for the United States, Johnny did not want to sound amateurish to the CIA agents. Rosselli thought for a moment of his old friend in Chicago, the late and very great Paul (The Waiter) Ricca, who always said at meetings such as this: "Make-a him go away!" Three black suits would jump up and run out into the night with sawed off shotguns and by morning somebody certainly had gone away. But in thinking of this, Rosselli decided Ricca's words were a touch too ethnic for the Protestant-oriented CIA. So after careful consideration, Johnny Rosselli announced:

"Let's hit Castro right in the head!"

Right away, the CIA agents waved their hands in dismissal. "We have something better," one of them said.

"A bomb!" Johnny Rosselli said.

"Not quite yet," the CIA agent said. "We have an operation that will give full impact throughout the world."

"What?"

"A special type of cigar," the CIA agent said. "The cigar contains certain chemicals. When Castro smokes this cigar, it will make his beard fall off. And then the hair on his head will fall off. Can you imagine it? A bald Castro! With no beard! He'll be the laughing stock of the world."

One of the other CIA agents said, "We have a back-up plan. There is a powder which can be put into Castro's shoes. The powder gets absorbed by Castro's feet and overnight his hair turns pure white. Can you imagine what that would do to his image?"

Johnny Rosselli shifted uncomfortably. He knew that if this type of talk ever came up in the La Stella Restaurant in New York, or in Mike Fish's in Chicago, some old mustache would announce: "You crazy." But Johnny Rosselli was in a new organization now. He wasn't even a button man. Therefore, he remained silent.

When this meeting was concluded, Rosselli and Robert Maheu went back to the hotel and packed. Maheu

was the man who enlisted Johnny Rosselli into the CIA. Maheu was a former FBI agent who now was working for Howard Hughes. Maheu made Johnny Rosselli change his hotel room, name and identification papers every two days while they were in Miami. Maheu, who was living with Rosselli, kept registering under his correct name.

"Why don't you change your name too?" Rosselli asked one day. Rosselli was in the Fontainebleau Hotel under the name of St. John.

"How would Mr. Hughes get ahold of me?" Maheu said.

Out there somewhere in the country, shuffling about in the empty Kleenex boxes he used for shoes. Howard Hughes could, at any moment, reach for a phone and say, "Get me Maheu!"

The special cigar was dispatched by motorboat to the island of Cuba. The motorboat did not make it because the motorboat did not have enough gas. Once back in Miami, the motorboat remained there. The Cubans owed the marine gas station \$800 and could not get a drop of gas until the bill was paid. Johnny Rosselli, patriot, plunged in. He paid the gas bill. Before he was through working for the CIA, Johnny Rosselli would go for close to \$10,000. The Cubans didn't have a quarter, the CIA agents kept their hands in their pockets, and Maheu always was on the phone with Howard Hughes. Johnny Rosselli always paid.

But Johnny Rosselli did not falter. Maybe when he was born, on July 4, 1905, the date didn't mean much. This was because Johnny Rosselli was born in Espezia, in Sicily. But living his life in the United States, Johnny Rosselli began to take a George M. Cohan attitude towards his birthday. Traditionally, all members of the Mafia are patriotic. The old man in Brooklyn, the Boss of Bosses, Carlo Gambino, is a violent anti-Communist. As is Meyer Lansky. Always, the remnants of the Mafia yearn for another Joe McCarthy. Just because a man plants a few bombs under car hoods, that does not mean he doesn't love the pledge of allegiance.

Of all of them, from Vegas to Chicago, none was more fervent in

love of country than Johnny Rosselli. When he was asked in 1960 if he wanted to "join a high security operation for the country" Johnny Rosselli's heart thumped against his chest-bone. He was honored. Kill Castro? Of course kill Castro. The man was a Commie Red. "I tried to do what my country asked me to do," Johnny Rosselli says. He did not pause to consider that his country could have crazy people running it.

After the Bay of Pigs, the CIA was ready to play rough. No longer was Fidel Castro to be turned into a clown. Now he was to be made to go away. They were singing Johnny Rosselli's song.

The Cubans in Miami had a chef in Havana who couldn't wait to poison Fidel's food. Maheu and CIA agents arrived in Miami with special, secret, super pills developed for the CIA. One pill could kill 84 people. But the pills were of such a special nature that prompt action was required. The pills were only good for a short time. If they were used too late, they would fizz harmlessly, like Alka Seltzer, in Fidel's glass. The pills could not be put into water that was too hot, tea, for example, and, as Rosselli remembers it, they couldn't be put in anything too cold either; a drink with ice cubes.

The pills had so many restrictions on them that everybody became confused. The motorboat went to Cuba with the pills and everybody sat around in Miami and waited for news of Castro dropping dead during the arroz con pollo.

"We heard that Castro got sick once or something, but nothing happened," Rosselli recalls. "The man kept living."

There is a story about one of the Cubans in Miami who had a wife who was holding hands with a waiter in a restaurant and one day the wife was walking down the street and she

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